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Brianna Schantz

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Brianna Schantz

Drs. Turlington and Cowart

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“for I shall die a shameful death”: Fate, Free-Will, and Malory’s Merlin

Abstract: This essay offers a close-reading of Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur* (1485) with particular regard to Malory’s fatalistic and simultaneous self-deterministic portrayal of the Arthurian Merlin. According to academia, Malory engages in the medieval debate concerning free-will and Fate, ultimately depicting *Morte*’s characters as responsible for their own outcomes and the Christian God as One Who may revoke punishments in accordance with His mercy. A notable example of this rescission of punishment is when Sir Gawaine, in a dream, tells King Arthur that God wishes to spare his life in the battle against his son Mordred. Originally, Arthur was meant to fall due to his incestual relations with Morgan le Fay, but, as demonstrated by Gawaine, this consequence is not final. Merlin, however, is an exception to the notion of Fate as changeable, which scholar Corinne Saunders contends is attributable to his magical abilities. Yet, due to Malory’s usage of sources that present Merlin as the child of an incubus and a nun (such as the Prose *Merlin*, John Hardyng’s *Chronicle*, and fundamentally Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae*), it is conclusive that Malory’s Merlin is supernatural—particularly, a heavenly body—in spite of Malory’s intentional reduction of supernaturality in his edition of the Round Table and of Camelot. Merlin’s existence as such then means that he has a designated fate regardless of his supernatural abilities and his free-willed choices (which Marilyn Corrie claims are the cause of his fate), unlike King Arthur, King Pellinore, and other fully human characters. Merlin acknowledges his fate yet chooses to act

virtuously throughout the text. In other words, Merlin is destined to be imprisoned by Nimue but, even so, acts in accordance with God and in accordance with goodness; thus, Malory's Merlin is not morally ambiguous, as various scholars have claimed, but benevolent.

Keywords: Arthurian legend; Merlin; Fate; free-will; morality; medieval literature